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Allegiances

SHADOWCLAN

Leader: Stormstar - Dark gray tabby tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Depthwater - Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw, dark blue eyes.

Medicine cat: Hawkfeather - Spotted brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Dewpaw

Warriors

Bluerain - Light blue gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentice, Flamepaw

Crowmask - Black tom with amber eyes.

Ashcloud - Dark gray and white tom with pale green eyes.

Silverblossom - Silver spotted she-cat with ice blue eyes.

Apprentice, Copperpaw

Maplefur - Creamy tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Diamondpaw

Rosebreeze - Creamy ginger tabby she-cat with pale amber eyes.

Milkblaze - White tom with creamy points, pale yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Timberpaw

Cougarfoot - Golden brown tom with a white muzzle, black ear tips and tail tip, amber eyes.

Cliffshade - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly, yellow eyes.

Cobratail - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Poppywing - Light red-brown tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Rainheart - Light gray tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Bloomfire - Orange she-cat with white paws, muzzle, and chin, dark ginger ears.

Poisonedsap - Dark golden she-cat with dark brown muzzle, throat, and nose blaze, black ears, paws, and tail tip, amber eyes.

Apprentices

Dewpaw - Spotted gray tom with yellow eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Diamondpaw - Silver gray she-cat with darker spots, white chest, muzzle, and chin, ice blue eyes.

Flamepaw - Ginger tabby tom with green eyes.

Copperpaw - Dark golden ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Timberpaw - Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Queens

Sunflower - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes. Mother to Depthwater's kits:

Blackkit - Black tom with yellow eyes.

Brownkit - Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Snakekit - Brown tabby and white tom with green eyes.

Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes. Expecting Ashcloud's kits.

Elders

Buzzardglare- Dark brown tabby tom with one blind eye, yellow eyes.

Foxshine - Ginger she-cat with yellow eyes.

Carrottail - Orange tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Chapter 1

"Rainpaw! Wake up!"

He opened his eyes and saw a familiar orange and white face staring at him, green eyes gleaming with amusement. "Come on, sleepyhead!" She purred. "It's dawn."

Already? He thought in dismay, his eyelids heavy as he blinked drowsily. He let out a groan and sunk back down into his nest. "Just give me a little longer..." He let his eyelids close, feeling the hypnotic call of sleep slowly grasp his mind.

"Come on!" She prodded his side, and he started a little. "Greenpine and Ashcloud are waiting outside."

Rainpaw sighed and pulled himself to his paws, shaking out his fur. "Okay, Bloompaw," He meowed drowsily. "I'm coming."

His sister purred and turned, exiting the den. Rainpaw felt exhausted. *Another training session? We were up late practicing night hunting at the burnt sycamore!* He stretched out his legs before following her.

When he stepped into the clearing, sure enough, the sun was just beginning to rise. Several cats were already putting themselves to work. The clan deputy, Depthwater, was by the meeting rock, flicking his tail as he surveyed the warriors around him.

"Crowmask, would you lead the dawn patrol today?" The dark blue-black tom nodded to the black warrior. "You can take Cobrapaw as well."

The tom nodded and turned to call to his apprentice, but he seemed to have overheard and hurried over, his amber eyes shining. "Dawn patrol? That sounds great!"

Beyond them, Silverblossom and Maplefur were leading their apprentices toward the thorn tunnel.

"So what are we learning today?" Copperpaw asked excitedly, bouncing alongside his mentor.

Silverblossom looked back at him, her blue eyes filled with amusement. "I think it's time we went over some battle moves."

"Battle moves?" Diamondpaw's eyes widened at her, then she looked up at her own mentor nervously. "Are we doing that too?"

"Yes," Maplefur nodded, his yellow eyes softening. "But don't worry, it's only training. No cat will get hurt."

The silver spotted apprentice relaxed a little, and the four headed out into the forest.

Ashcloud and Greenpine sat waiting a few fox lengths away from the apprentices den. Bloompaw was standing beside the gray and white tom, her tail whisking back and forth across the pine needle strewn ground.

"I expect you're still tired after last night," Greenpine commented as Rainpaw joined them. When he nodded, she blinked sympathetically. "This will be the only training session for today. You can use the rest of the day to rest."

Rainpaw looked at her gratefully. "Thanks, Greenpine," He purred. *I'm lucky to have such a great mentor. She's so understanding, and she's not stern like Crowmask or Buzzardglare.*

"You're very kind," Ashcloud echoed his thoughts, gazing at his mentor fondly. "A lot of mentors could learn a thing or two from you."

Greenpine ducked her head in embarrassment. "Thank you," She purred. "You're a wonderful mentor too."

The gray and white warrior purred loudly as he gazed at her, and she stared back at him affectionately. Rainpaw exchanged an amused look with his sister. Any cat could see that Greenpine and

Ashcloud were a mouse tail away from becoming mates. It was certainly awkward seeing their mentors all moony for each other.

"So... What will we be learning today?" Rainpaw prompted, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

The two cats seemed to remember that they had apprentices and snapped their attention away from each other. "Right, uh, we'll be going over some hunting techniques," Ashcloud meowed.

Greenpine nodded. "Specifically catching birds in the treetops. It isn't something that ShadowClan cats do often, but it's a good skill to learn."

"That's right. You never know when you'll need it."

Rainpaw turned to see Bluerain padding toward them, her red tabby apprentice by her side.

Poppypaw! He perked up at the sight of the pretty red tabby she-cat, his tiredness forgotten. She and Rainpaw had been training together for moons now, and they had become inseparable. She was his very best friend. "Hi, Poppypaw!"

"Hello, Rainpaw!" She purred and bounded forward, her soft tail in the air as she bumped her head against his in greeting. "How are you today?"

He gazed at Poppypaw happily, his tail high in the air. "Great now!" He turned to Ashcloud and Greenpine. "Are they coming with us?" He asked hopefully.

As Bloompaw chuckled, Greenpine looked at Poppypaw's mentor questioningly. "Are you?"

The silver she-cat joined the two warriors. "That's what I came to suggest," She meowed. "If you wouldn't mind having us along."

Before either warrior could respond, Rainpaw cut in. "Of course not," He exclaimed. "Let's go!"

Ashcloud shot him an amused look. "You're awfully eager to have

your mother with you for a training session," He commented.

Bluerain was the mother of Rainpaw and Bloompaw. Of course, he didn't mind his mother's company, but she was also the mentor of Poppypaw, and where Bluerain went, her apprentice went. He felt excited at every opportunity to spend time with his close friend.

"Oh, I doubt that," Bluerain chuckled, gazing at her kits warmly. "But I would like to see how your training is coming along. I'm very proud of you." She paused before adding, "Perhaps when we return to camp you could tell Carrottail what you did today."

Rainpaw nodded, his enthusiasm fading as he thought of his father. Just a moon ago, he had moved into the elders den. Carrottail was very young to have retired, and should have continued his warrior duties for many more moons. But during the time of Bone Shred's attacks on the clans, his father had suffered a leg injury that refused to heal. Unable to hunt or fight properly, Carrottail had been forced to retire. Rainpaw, Bloompaw, and Bluerain visited him often to try to cheer him up and remind him that his kin still cared for him.

"Right." Ashcloud stood and turned toward the thorn tunnel, flicking his gray tail. "Let's go."

Greenpine padded alongside him, their pelts brushing, and Bluerain followed close behind with Poppypaw.

As Rainpaw took up the rear, Bloompaw slowed her pace to walk alongside him, shooting him an amused look. "Why don't you just become mates and have kits already?" She chuckled.

He blinked at her in confusion. "What?"

"Don't play dumb." Bloompaw's eyes gleamed with amusement. "Everyone sees how close you and Poppypaw are. Everytime you look at her, your eyes grow round like a full moon over fourtrees!"

"Me and Poppypaw?" Rainpaw exclaimed, his fur prickling with discomfort. "She- She's my best friend, that's all."

Bloompaw bounced alongside him, chanting teasingly. "Rainpaw and Poppypaw sitting in a tree, L I C K-"

Shut up! Rainpaw felt squeamish and ran ahead of his sister to join Greenpine, his pelt hot with embarrassment. *Poppypaw is just my best friend!*

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The morning air brushed through Rainpaw's fur like pine needles, chilly and sharp. He crouched on the forest floor, shivering beside Poppypaw. Their mentors stood a few fox lengths away, looking up into a pine tree where Bloompaw clung to the trunk.

"You can do it, Bloompaw!" Ashcloud called encouragingly. "You're halfway there!"

The orange and white she-cat's eyes were round with fear as she dug her claws into the bark, seeming frozen. "I-I don't think I can go any higher!"

Bluerain stepped forward and stared up at her daughter worriedly. "What if she falls?"

"She'll be alright," Greenpine meowed. "She's not very high."

The flapping of wings caught Rainpaw's attention, and he gasped as a thrush swooped over his head and up into the pine tree, perching on a branch near the top. *It's just a bird...* He let out a sigh of relief.

"You're very jumpy," Poppypaw meowed, her eyes filled with concern. "Are you alright?"

He swallowed, embarrassed by his startled reaction to the bird. "I-I'm fine," He stammered, glancing around nervously. "I-I'm just a little scared," He admitted. "Some of Bone Shred's rogues are still around. What if we're attacked?"

Poppypaw's blue eyes grew warm. "Don't worry, we'll be fine," She promised, leaning forward to give him a reassuring lick on the ear. "There are six of us. No rogue would dare try to attack." She meowed gently. "And if they did, I'd protect you."

"Really?" Rainpaw blinked at her, feeling warmth spread through him from ears to tail tip as he met her gentle blue gaze. "Thanks... I-

I mean, I'd protect you too," He stammered in embarrassment. *I'd try... Those rogues are terrifying! They'd rip me apart.*

But the red tabby she-cat didn't seem bothered by his awkwardness and purred. "I know." She gazed at him, and Rainpaw stared back warmly.

"That's it!" Ashcloud's encouraging yowl caught his attention, and he returned his focus to the pine tree, surprised when he saw that Bloompaw had climbed further up the trunk, pulling herself from branch to branch.

The thrush that had startled Rainpaw was perched high in the tree, seeming unaware of the nearing apprentice.

"She's really high," Rainpaw meowed nervously, rising to his paws and staring up at his sister. "Bloompaw, be careful!"

Bloompaw had pulled herself onto one of the highest branches, crouching and digging her claws into it as it swayed under her weight. The thrush sat on a branch above her, cleaning under its wing with its beak. The she-cat's tail swished slowly as she stared at it and slowly moved forward.

"She's going for it," Ashcloud realized, worry edging his tone as he stared up at his apprentice. "Bloompaw, wait-"

The orange and white she-cat sprang just as Ashcloud spoke. The thrush let out a startled squawk and flew off in a flurry of flapping wings, and Bloompaw let out a shocked gasp as she missed the branch and plummeted downward paws first.

"Bloompaw!" Bluerain shrieked.

The apprentice managed to grab hold of a branch before she could continue falling and dug her claws into the branch, but she was unable to pull herself up. She let out a terrified cry as she dangled helplessly, her hind legs flailing in the air.

She's going to fall! Rainpaw let out a horrified gasp. Ashcloud, who was closest to the tree, shot forward, but Poppypaw was faster. He watched in amazement as she scurried up the tree as fast and

nimble as a squirrel, her striped tail rippling behind her.

"Poppypaw, be careful!" Greenpine exclaimed, and Bluerain gasped behind her.

Rainpaw shot forward to stand with the warriors, staring up anxiously. "Poppypaw!" His eyes darted from his friend to his sister, his heart galloping in panic. *I don't want either of them to fall!*

The orange and white she-cat let out a wail as her claws began to slip. Poppypaw pulled herself onto a branch just below her. "Hold on, I'm coming!" She gasped.

I can't look! I can't see her fall! But Rainpaw felt frozen, unable to tear his horrified gaze from his sister as she dangled far above him.

She scrambled up the bark and onto the branch just as one of Bloompaw's paws slipped. A heartbeat later, Poppypaw reached down and grabbed her by the scruff, gripping the branch tightly as she carefully hauled the apprentice up.

"Oh, thank StarClan..." Bluerain let out a sigh of relief, and beside her, Ashcloud let out a groan as he relaxed. Greenpine leaned on him reassuringly.

Rainpaw watched, still shaky as he recovered from the shock of the situation. The fur along his spine slowly flattened as he watched the two she-cats carefully make their way back down the tree. *They're okay!*

When they reached the last branch, Poppypaw leaped down first, looking back at Bloompaw, who more hesitantly followed, looking relieved to be on the ground again. She crouched and trembled, her green eyes round.

"Bloompaw!" Bluerain hurried to her daughter's side and rubbed her head against hers. "You nearly scared me out of my fur!"

The orange and white she-cat shivered. "Y-you weren't the one up there!" She looked at Poppypaw, letting out a sigh of relief. "Thank you!"

Rainpaw stepped to Poppypaw's side, staring at his sister anxiously. *She's alright...* He turned to his friend, feeling a wave of admiration wash over him. "How did you climb up there so fast? You're so brave!"

The red tabby she-cat looked surprised at his praise. "Oh, that was nothing," She insisted, looking embarrassed. "Any cat would have done the same."

"I don't think I could have tore up that tree as quickly as you did," Ashcloud meowed.

Greenpine nodded agreement. "I've never seen anything like that. Did Bluerain show you how to climb so well?"

Before Poppypaw could respond, Bluerain shook her head. "We've only had one lesson. I certainly can't climb like that," She meowed, staring at her apprentice proudly. "She seems to have a natural talent for climbing."

"Don't tell SkyClan that, they might want her for themselves," Ashcloud chuckled, waving his tail. "ShadowClan will be lucky to call you one of our warriors."

Poppypaw ducked her head, looking embarrassed at all the attention and praise. "Really? Thank you!" She purred humbly.

Rainpaw gave her an affectionate nudge, looking at her proudly. *She's such a talented cat! I wish I could be like her.*

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Though Bloompaw wasn't injured, Bluerain had decided to take her back to camp to ask Hawkfeather and Dewpaw for some thyme to help her recover from the shock.

Ashcloud and Greenpine had sent Rainpaw and Poppypaw to catch frogs in the marsh. They claimed that they would be watching them the entire time to assess their skills, however, whenever he looked over his shoulder, he saw their mentors sitting close together, purring and giving each other compliments.

Just a little closer... Rainpaw thought as he carefully crept through the mud toward a toad. He was about to pounce when the croak of a frog caught his attention, and he turned his head.

Poppypaw was crouched on the opposite side of the marsh, her blue eyes focused ahead on a dark green frog that sat in the muddy earth with its back to her. He watched, his toad forgotten as she crept forward on delicate red paws, her movements slow and careful. *She's such a great hunter...* He was unable to look away from her.

She placed a paw down on the muddy ground harder than she had intended, and the earth squished under her loudly. The frog immediately hopped forward, and Poppypaw sprang after it, kicking up mud behind her.

Snapping out of his trance, Rainpaw raced forward and intercepted the frog, briefly alarmed as he found himself skidding in the mud, sending it splattering forward. The frog immediately leaped back in the direction it had came, seeming to have forgotten about Poppypaw, who easily grasped it in her claws and delivered the killing bite.

"Wow!" Rainpaw panted and pulled a paw out of the mud, disgusted as he felt the cold liquid ooze between his toes. "Great catch!"

Poppypaw raised her head and purred. "You helped. We make a great team."

"We do," He agreed, and they gazed at each other for a long moment. Suddenly, he became aware of the mud he had splattered all over her when he'd slipped. "Oh, sorry!" He stepped forward and started licking her face clean, only to jerk back and stick his tongue out in disgust at the taste of mud. "Ew!"

Poppypaw chuckled in amusement. "I can clean myself, silly!" she turned away, looking over her shoulder at him as she laughed. "Come on, let's get dry."

He followed her and pulled himself out of the mud, shaking the sticky liquid from his fur. Poppypaw looked down at her mud-plastered fur in dismay. "My fur won't look decent for a moon!" She

joked.

"Even with all that mud, you're still the most beautiful cat in the forest," Rainpaw purred. She raised her head in surprise, and with a start, he realized that he had spoken his thoughts out loud. And that wasn't all. *Bloompaw is right...* He realized. *I'm in love with Poppypaw.*

As he ducked his head in embarrassment, Poppypaw spoke, her eyes filled with surprise and warmth. "Do you really mean that..?" She asked hesitantly, sounding shy.

Rainpaw met her gaze nervously. "I-I do," He meowed softly. "You're the kindest, most beautiful, and talented cat I've ever met. You're..." He shuffled his paws. "You're much more than a friend to me. You're special."

He shyly met her gaze, seeing warmth glowing inside her eyes. "Rainpaw... I've felt the same way for a long time," She murmured. "I love spending time with you." She hesitated before adding softly, "I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

Is this really happening? Rainpaw's heart pounded in his chest as his pelt warmed under her gaze. "I want that too!" He hesitantly stepped forward and sat close to her, and she leaned against him, rubbing her head against his. A purr rumbled in his throat, and he felt her purring as well against him.

"I love you," He purred happily and rubbed his cheek against her head, feeling weak and warm with joy. "You're the best cat in ShadowClan."

Poppypaw purred back and licked his neck fur, twining her tail with his. "I love you too, Rainpaw. We'll have a wonderful future together, won't we?"

"Of course!" Rainpaw replied happily. "Any future with you in it is sure to be wonderful."

She leaned back and met his gaze warmly. "As long as it's with you. Once we're warriors, we'll be able to become mates, and-" She hesitated, looking at him shyly. "And perhaps we could have kits."

"That sounds like a dream from StarClan," Rainpaw purred and licked her head, and she leaned against him, purring loudly. "We're meant to be. StarClan has laid out the path to a bright future ahead of us, and I can't wait to follow it with you!"

Chapter 2

Rainheart awoke and slowly blinked open his eyes, taking in his surroundings; The warriors den. He felt a warm body pressed alongside him and turned his head, feeling warmth spread through him as he rested his eyes on his mate.

The light of dawn shone through the roof of the den onto Poppywing, dappling her fur in vibrant splashes like red leaves in leaf-fall. *I still can't believe she took me as her mate.* He thought, gazing at her admiringly. *She's so smart and talented. I'm the luckiest tom in the forest.*

Poppywing stirred against him and slowly parted her eyelids to reveal soft blue eyes. She rested them on him and purred softly. "What are you staring at?"

His fur grew hot with embarrassment, and he flicked an ear back. "Just the most beautiful cat in the clan," He murmured, meeting her gaze warmly.

Poppywing blinked affectionately at him and let out a purr, rubbing her head against his, and he purred happily. After a moment, she stood and arched her back as she stretched out, then looked down at him. "Would you like to go hunting together?" She asked.

"Of course!" Rainheart rose to his paws, and she hurried toward the entrance of the den. He started after her, and not a moment later his heart skipped a beat as he tripped over a leg, awkwardly stumbling forward.

"Hey, watch it!" Cliffshade grunted, raising his head and glaring at Rainheart. "*Some* of us were up all night guarding the camp."

He ducked his head in embarrassment. "Sorry, Cliffshade." As the gray and brown tom rolled his eyes and settled back into his nest, Rainheart looked ahead at Poppywing awkwardly. *Why do I have to be so clumsy?* He wondered, hot with embarrassment.

But Poppywing didn't seem to mind his lack of coordination. "Don't mind him, Rainheart," She meowed as he reached her, casting Cliffshade an amused look. "Every cat knows Cliffshade is a grumpy furball."

The brown and gray tom grumbled something, his muzzle buried in the moss of his nest. He gave his tail a lash of annoyance as the couple left the den. *Poppywing is so supportive.* Rainheart thought in amusement. *Few cats are willing to put Cliffshade in his place.*

In the clearing, many cats had already begun their day. The ShadowClan deputy, Depthwater, was standing by the meeting rock, organizing patrols. "Crowmask, would you lead a patrol to leave fresh scent markers on the WindClan border?" He paused and scanned the clearing. "Rosebreeze, Ashcloud, and Silverblossom can join you."

The black tom nodded. "Right." He turned his head as Rosebreeze and Ashcloud padded over to the deputy, noticing Silverblossom sitting at the side of the clearing with her apprentice, Copperpaw. "Silverblossom!" He called. "Come on. Copperpaw can come as well."

Silverblossom pricked her ears and said something to her apprentice before crossing the clearing to them. "I'm sorry, Stormstar said it was alright if we gave our apprentices their assessments today? We were about to leave."

"Oh, sorry." Depthwater looked embarrassed and gave his dark chest fur a few licks. "I forgot."

"It's alright, Depthwater," Silverblossom purred and dipped her head.

Depthwater had only been deputy for a couple moons now, ever since the death of their old deputy, Pinetail. She had been killed in the battle against Bone Shred's rogues. Though Depthwater had been an experienced and skilled warrior, he had big pawsteps to fill, and many questioned if he was a worthy replacement of Pinetail, even Depthwater himself. But Stormstar seemed confident in his choice of deputy. Though he made mistakes now and then, he was

quickly adapting to his new position and proving himself a fine deputy.

"Stormstar is going with you, isn't he?" The deputy meowed, looking past her as the clan leader stepped out of his den.

The silver spotted she-cat nodded. "He wanted to oversee their assessments."

"Of course." Depthwater dipped his head. "I'm sure the apprentices will do very well, Silverblossom." He turned his attention to Crowmask, who looked at him questioningly. "Take Maplefur and Diamondpaw instead."

As Silverblossom turned away, Milkblaze, Timberpaw, Bluerain, and Flamepaw stood with Copperpaw, waiting for her return. Stormstar stood with Milkblaze, speaking with him quietly. Rainheart's sister, Bloomfire, was sitting near Flamepaw, who looked nervous.

"I hope I pass my assessment," Flamepaw meowed worriedly. "What if I fail? Stormstar is going to be there!"

Bloomfire gave him a nudge. "You? Fail? Impossible. You'll do great, Stormstar will see that. Then we can finally be warriors together!"

Flamepaw looked at the orange and white she-cat, his eyes filling with warmth. "Thanks, Bloomfire. I can't wait."

They'll be mates too before long. Rainheart thought, happiness for his sister filling his heart. Though Flamepaw was still an apprentice, he was only a few moons younger than her. They had spent their apprenticeship together up until a few moons ago when Bloomfire earned her warrior name. Flamepaw couldn't wait to join her as a warrior and be able to hunt, patrol, and share a den with her.

"Bloomfire will be happy when he's earned his warrior name," Poppywing commented as she followed Rainheart's gaze to the apprentices. "They make a good couple." She began crossing the clearing, her tail high in the air.

He followed her and nodded with a purr. "They do. They-"

"Poppywing! Rainheart!"

They paused and turned to see Depthwater padding up to them. "I need two more warriors to join Cougarfoot's hunting patrol," He meowed. "Would you like to?"

Poppywing exchanged a disappointed look with Rainheart before returning her attention to the deputy. "Actually, Depthwater, me and Rainheart wanted to hunt on our own, if that's alright?"

The blueish black tom's eyes gleamed. "Of course, you always do," He gently teased. "You're both such fine hunters, I'd be a fool to stop you." He dipped his head. "Good hunting, you two."

As the clan deputy returned to the side of the clearing, Poppywing looked at Rainheart, her blue eyes gleaming. "Come on, I'll race you to the burnt sycamore!" She raced through the thorn tunnel.

Rainheart let out a purr. "That's not fair!" He bounded after her, knowing there was no way he could outrun her. But he didn't care. He loved spending time with Poppywing, more than anything else. *I'm far from the strongest, fastest, or cleverest warrior in the clan.* He thought as he ran through the pine forest. *I'm certainly no match for Poppywing in any way. Yet she loves me for the cat I am, and I couldn't be more grateful.*

By the time he reached the burnt sycamore, Poppywing was already sitting at the base of the tree, her tail curled neatly over her small paws. Her eyes gleamed with amusement. "What took you so long?"

"Show-off." Rainheart purred and gave her a lick on the ear, and she chuckled. "Where shall we hunt today?"

The red tabby she-cat looked around thoughtfully. "No cat has hunted in the woodland by the SkyClan border in a while," She pointed out. "We might have some luck there."

That's a great idea. Rainheart thought. The two of them padded through the mucky grass, their shoulders brushing as they stayed close to each other's side. Their tails twined together, and occasionally they met each others' gaze, finding them alight with

the same happiness and love for one another.

When they reached the patch of trees by the SkyClan border, Poppywing's ears pricked forward. "Squirrel," She murmured, scanning the bushes around them.

Rainheart purred in amusement. "You're going after it, aren't you?" ShadowClan cats didn't normally chase squirrels. But Poppywing seemed to enjoy climbing trees to catch them. Though it wasn't every cat's favorite option on the fresh kill pile, he could see how happy it made her and how proud she was of her unusual skill.

"Of course I-" Poppywing broke off as the fluffy tailed creature appeared behind a tree root, searching for nuts. With that, she took off after it.

He watched as the red striped she-cat pelted past him and up a tree, leaping swiftly from branch to branch after the squirrel. *She couldn't be more graceful if she were flying.* He thought, admiring her. Stormstar had named her Poppywing for this very reason. No other ShadowClan cat had such skill. *She's practically part squirrel herself!*

As Poppywing leaped for another branch, she nearly missed, and Rainheart inhaled sharply as she scrambled for a grip on it. *She's going to fall!* He started forward, but she had regained her balance and climbed one more branch where she caught the squirrel and sank her teeth into its neck.

He let his fur slowly flatten as she returned to the ground, holding the limp squirrel proudly in her jaws. "Do you always have to scare me like that?" He asked anxiously. "You could have fallen!"

Poppywing set down the squirrel and purred in amusement. "Rainheart, you worry far too much. Nothing is going to happen to me."

"You don't know that." He leaned forward and licked her on the head. "What if-"

"Hold it off!"

A distant, terrified yowl cut him off. *Silverblossom?* He and

Poppywing froze and jerked their heads in the direction of the sound as it was followed by shrieks and snarls.

"Hurry, all of you, run!"

That's Milkblaze! Rainheart realized in alarm. *He's Timberpaw's mentor. He and his brothers are supposed to be completing their assessment.* But something had clearly gone wrong.

"Something's wrong! Come on!" Poppywing bolted away, leaving the squirrel behind. Rainheart shot after her, his heart racing as they ran through the trees toward the yowling.

As they got closer, he began to pick up the reek of fox, and he immediately knew what was happening. *Oh no!* They burst out of the bushes and into a clearing.

A huge fox had its back to them, snarling and twisting as Milkblaze clung to its back, digging his claws into the fox's pelt. Not far from them, Stormstar crouched in front of a second fox, his teeth bared. Silverblossom bit into the fox's tail.

Great StarClan, those are the biggest foxes I've ever seen! Rainheart thought in horror. He froze when he saw Bluerain crouched in the grass, blood running from a wound in her shoulder.

"Bluerain!" He gasped and shot to his mother's side, nudging her gently. "Come on, you have to move!" She shook her head and slumped onto her side, revealing a bloody bite in her flank. He turned his head in alarm. "Poppy-"

But his mate was already at his side with a wad of leaves, and she and Rainheart began pressing them to Bluerain's wounds as she groaned. He shot an anxious glance behind him to see what the foxes were doing, afraid that one would try to finish off his mother.

Stormstar and Silverblossom were taking turns swiping at their fox, while the other twisted and threw Milkblaze off of it, snarling.

As Milkblaze staggered to his paws, Copperpaw and Timberpaw were pressed against the bushes at the side of the clearing, their fur bristling. Flamepaw and Bloomfire were crouched in front of them

protectively, glaring at the first fox. With a furious bark, it lunged for Bloomfire, grabbing her hind leg and dragging her forward as she shrieked in alarm.

Bloomfire! Rainheart's heart jolted with terror.

He was about to start toward his sister when Flamepaw let out a furious screech. "Let her go!" He leaped onto the fox's head and sank his teeth into its ear, slashing his hind claws at the fox's eyes and muzzle.

It snarled and released Bloomfire, sending her tumbling to the ground, blood trickling from her hind leg. Copperpaw and Timberpaw ran to her side, looking down at her anxiously.

"Oh, StarClan, we can't take on two huge foxes like that!" Copperpaw whimpered.

Timberpaw shot a glare at his brother. "Stop it! We're about to be warriors, stop whining like a kit!"

Flamepaw was losing his grip on the fox as it leaped and twisted angrily. With a mighty swing of its head, it sent Flamepaw flying through the air and straight into Copperpaw, knocking his brother off his paws from where he'd been crouched by Bloomfire.

With a snarl, the fox lunged for Timberpaw, grabbing him by the tail, and he shrieked out in pain as he was lifted off the ground. The fox shook him violently, then threw him headfirst into a pine tree.

Timberpaw groaned as he slumped against the trunk, his yellow eyes appearing to be unfocused as the fox stalked toward him, snarling lowly and lashing its fluffy tail.

He's stunned. Rainheart realized in alarm. "Timberpaw needs help!" He yowled.

Stormstar heard him from where he and Silverblossom fought the second fox. He shot a panicked look at his mate. "Silverblossom, go!"

The silver she-cat looked at him in bewilderment as the fox snapped

at her, and she ducked just before its teeth closed around her ear. "But-"

"Go!" Stormstar leaped away from the fox and charged for the one cornering Timberpaw. As the fox crouched to spring, teeth bared, Stormstar leaped in the way and arched his back, snarling furiously. "You won't lay another claw on my clanmates!"

Rainheart stared in shock as Stormstar lunged at the fox's throat and buried his teeth into it's white neck fur, blood spurting out onto his face. The fox let out a sharp, high pitched yelp and fell onto its back, snapping its jaws at him and swiping its legs madly, slashing open Stormstar's tabby pelt, but the clan leader was relentless. He bit down harder on the fox's throat, ignoring the wounds the mad creature inflicted on him.

At last, the fox stopped moving, and Stormstar released its throat, spitting out a mouthful of blood. The other fox seemed to freeze, staring at its companion in shock. Then it let out a furious screech and lunged for Stormstar.

The clan leader instantly bolted through the trees, the fox hot on his tail, snapping and snarling angrily.

"Stormstar!" Silverblossom shrieked, staring after her mate in horror.

Milkblaze panted and shook blood from his ear, looking at her anxiously. "Come on, we all need to leave before it comes back."

"What are you talking about?" She demanded, glaring at him in bewilderment. "We have to help Stormstar! He can't fight that fox alone!"

"He knows that." Milkblaze met her gaze, his eyes dull with sorrow.

Shock and sadness pierced Rainheart's heart like a thorn. *He's sacrificing himself so that we can get away.*

Silverblossom stared back at the white and cream warrior, as though struggling to understand what he was saying. Then she hung her head and let out a sob of grief.

In the distance, they heard the mad snarling of the fox, accompanied by a screech of agony. *It caught Stormstar. And seeing how Silverblossom is acting, this must have been his last life...* Rainheart shut his eyes. *Our leader is dead.*

"We need to leave." Milkblaze looked down and let out a shaky sigh. "Quickly. Help the wounded."

Flamepaw and Copperpaw were helping Bloomfire to her paws, letting her lean on them as she winced at the pain in her hind leg.

Beyond them, Silverblossom was gently nudging Timberpaw. "Come, we need to hurry." Her voice cracked as she spoke.

The brown tabby apprentice blinked at her, trembling and in shock. "B-But... Stormstar..." He seemed completely stunned as she gently guided him away from the tree, wrapping her tail around him. "He gave his life for me..."

"Come on, Bluerain," Poppywing murmured, gently nudging her to her paws.

She stumbled, and Rainheart let her lean on his shoulder, giving her cheek fur a lick. "Can you walk?" He asked worriedly.

"Yes, I think so," Bluerain rasped, and the warriors headed back through the trees toward their camp. Silverblossom was sobbing, her ears flat with grief. Rainheart exchanged a dull look with Poppywing. Every cat remained silent and solemn as they walked, processing the fact that their leader would not return with them.

Chapter 3

The cats remained quiet as they slowly padded through the thorn tunnel and into the ShadowClan camp. Rainheart glanced worriedly at Bluerain. His mother was limping between him and Poppywing, breathing quickly as blood trickled from her wounds. *I hope it's not serious.* He thought uneasily.

"Look, they're back!" Diamondpaw perked up from where she sat near the apprentices den. "How did-" She broke off when she saw the condition of her denmates and the warriors. "Dewpaw!" She gasped.

Her brother immediately poked his head out of the medicine den, looking at her anxiously. "Yeah? What's-" He saw the returning cats and bounded across the clearing. "Hawkfeather, we need herbs!" He called over his shoulder in alarm.

As the medicine cats hurried over, more cats became aware of the injured cats and padded closer, meowing to one another in alarm.

"What's happened?" Rosebreeze gasped, rushing to her brother, Milkblaze's side. The white warrior had his tail gently rested around Silverblossom as she sat, her head hung in grief.

Rainheart and Poppywing slowly crouched, helping to lower Bluerain to the ground. She slumped onto her side and let out a shaky sigh. "Thank you."

"Hold on, Bluerain." Poppywing gave her ear a reassuring lick. "Hawkfeather and Dewpaw will fix you up."

Will they? Rainheart stared down at his mother anxiously. *What if they can't? What if she joins StarClan?* He struggled to push the horrible thought away, but fear of losing his mother remained dominant in his mind.

At that moment, Hawkfeather joined them and crouched by

Bluerain. "What happened?" He demanded, his tone sharp with worry.

"A fox," Poppywing meowed before Rainheart could gather himself. "She'll be alright, won't she?"

The medicine cat gave Bluerain's shoulder wound a sniff, then studied her belly. "Yes, she'll be fine," He assured them, and Rainheart let out a sigh of relief, relaxing. "Come on, Bluerain, let's get you to the medicine den."

As Hawkfeather gently nudged her to her paws, Poppywing stepped forward. "I'll help," She meowed. The brown tabby gave her a nod of gratitude before Bluerain leaned against him, and together he and Poppywing slowly guided her toward the medicine den.

Rainheart watched them for a moment, letting out a shaky sigh. *She'll be alright.* He turned away and tensed as he caught sight of Bloomfire. His sister lay on her side while Dewpaw pressed cobwebs to the bloody teeth marks in her leg.

Flamepaw was crouched beside her, his green eyes lit with anxiety. "Don't worry, everything's going to be okay," He covered her head and ears with licks. "You were really brave."

"So were you," She purred back dryly, her eyes dull with pain and exhaustion.

Behind them, Timberpaw was leaning on Copperpaw, his yellow eyes wide as he trembled, still stunned. His brother watched him worriedly. "I've never seen him like this!"

"Rainheart?"

He turned his head and saw Poppywing padding across the clearing toward him from the medicine den. When she reached him, she sat down, and he met her gaze anxiously. "Bluerain will be alright," She promised. "Hawkfeather is taking care of her." She paused and studied him, her blue eyes filled with concern. "Are *you* alright?"

"Yes." Rainheart gave himself a shake and relaxed against her. "I was just worried about her."

"A fox attacked you?" Ashcloud bristled, staring at the battered cats anxiously. "Has it made a den in our territory?"

"Where was it?" Cougarfoot demanded.

The cats began to fire questions at them anxiously until Depthwater weaved his way through the crowd. "Give them space!" He urged, and as the cats stepped back and quieted, he looked at the injured warriors worriedly. "Rainheart? Can you tell us what happened?"

Rainheart grew uncomfortable as the eyes of every cat fell on him. "Err I wasn't there to see how it started," He admitted, shuffling his paws. "Me and Poppywing were hunting when we heard yowls and went to see what was going on."

"I see." Depthwater gave him a nod and turned to the others. "Milkblaze?"

The white and cream warrior looked up and gave Silverblossom a concerned look before he left her side to join Rainheart at the front of the group. "We took our apprentices out for their assessments," He began quietly. "We had just given them instructions when two foxes came out of nowhere and attacked us." He paused and looked over his shoulder. "The apprentices weren't badly injured, thank StarClan. They fought bravely."

"Wait a moment," Cliffshade interrupted, scanning the group in bewilderment. "Stormstar went with you. Where is he?"

"Stormstar?" Dewpaw's eyes flashed with alarm. "Is he alright?"

The other cats began to murmur anxiously to one another as they realized that their leader was missing. Depthwater stared at Milkblaze, his eyes widening. "Where is Stormstar?" He demanded worriedly. "Is he wounded?"

At the mention of her mate, Silverblossom hung her head and choked out a sob of grief, and that was enough for most cats to realize what had happened. Many let out shocked gasps and cries of distress.

"Stormstar fought fearlessly against the foxes." As Milkblaze started

speaking, they slowly quieted to hear his story. "During the fight, one of the foxes had thrown Timberpaw against a tree. He was stunned and had no chance of escaping." He paused, his eyes dull with sorrow. "Stormstar attacked and managed to kill the fox before it could take Timberpaw's life."

Timberpaw's eyes were squeezed shut now. Flamepaw looked up from Bloomfire to gaze at him sympathetically.

"The other fox was furious, and Stormstar ran away as it gave chase." He hesitated, dropping his gaze. "He knew what he was doing. He led the fox away from us. He gave his life for Timberpaw, for all of us. We heard the fox catch him just before we left."

The entire clan fell silent for a moment as they processed this terrible truth. Their leader was dead. Diamondpaw broke the silence with a wail of grief for her father. Silverblossom pulled her close with one paw, and Dewpaw joined his kin, his yellow eyes stunned and lit with sorrow as he pressed his head into his mother's fur.

Depthwater's dark blue eyes were filled with shock and sadness. "Stormstar was the noblest cat I've ever met..." His voice cracked as he spoke. "Of course he would have sacrificed himself for his clanmates."

"He wouldn't have had to if it weren't for that flea-bitten fox." Crowmask growled, sinking his claws into the earth. "We should find it and avenge him!"

"Yes!" Cougarfoot yowled his agreement, and many others joined in.

"That's enough!" Depthwater snapped, and the warriors fell silent, their fur bristling and ready for battle. "We will do something about the fox if it's still on our territory. But Stormstar is dead. We are to be peaceful and pay our respects, not fuel ourselves for battle. We owe that to him."

Many cats murmured their agreement, and even Crowmask nodded, dropping his gaze shamefully.

Depthwater drew in a breath and slowly turned away. The cats watched as the dark bluish black tom made his way through the crowd and leaped onto the meeting rock, turning to face what would soon be the clan he led. "We have no body to prepare," He meowed quietly. "But nonetheless, we will hold a vigil for Stormstar. Every cat, please gather."

The clan slowly gathered in front of the meeting rock, forming a circle around an empty space where Stormstar's body would have been. Rainheart and Poppywing sat together behind Cougarfoot and Cliffshade, lowering their heads respectfully.

Silverblossom, Diamondpaw, and Dewpaw were closest to the rock, their expressions full of sorrow. Hawkfeather sat beside Dewpaw and cast his apprentice a sympathetic look.

"We're gathered here today to honor the memory of Stormstar," Depthwater began. "He was a strong, noble cat who I'm honored to have known all my life. He always put his clan first, and he led us bravely through the battles against Bone Shred's rogues." He paused and stared down into the clearing solemnly. "I never thought this day would come. I don't think I, nor any cat could become such a great leader as Stormstar was. But I will take on the duties he has passed on to me and protect ShadowClan, the cats that he cared for so much." He lowered his head. "May you find good hunting, swift running, and shelter when you sleep."

When Depthwater finished, the clan remained silent for a moment. "Silverblossom?" Hawkfeather prompted gently. "Would you like to speak?"

The silver she-cat gave a small nod and slowly stepped forward, looking distant. "Stormstar was the bravest, strongest cat I ever met," She rasped. "He was the best mate any she-cat could ask for, and a wonderful father. I already miss him dearly, but one day we'll hunt together once more in StarClan."

Rainheart felt sorrow pierce his heart at her words. *She's right.* He thought solemnly. *It won't be easy, but one day they'll be together again. There's peace in knowing that.*

Dewpaw spoke next. "My father was kind, brave, and cared for his clan above all," He meowed quietly, his yellow eyes filled with grief. "I'm proud to be his son. I know that he is safe and happy in StarClan, and I'll see him again at the moonstone."

As Diamondpaw began speaking, Rainheart noticed movement from the corner of his eye and turned his head. Poisonedsap was returning to the warriors den, her ragged tail lashing behind her. Maplefur stared after her, his eyes flashing with surprise. But after a moment, he returned his attention to the vigil.

Not far from him, Milkblaze watched the entrance to the warriors den where Poisonedsap had disappeared, his yellow eyes narrowed to slits.

She left in the middle of the clan leader's vigil? Rainheart blinked, puzzled. He supposed that because Poisonedsap used to be a rogue, she didn't believe in StarClan and found the ceremony pointless. *But she should still have the decency to be respectful.*

He glanced back toward Milkblaze, seeing the anger burning in his eyes. *There's something more to this.* He thought. *But whatever it is, it's their business. Perhaps this story will be revealed to us someday.*

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Rainheart awoke to sobbing. He opened his eyes and raised his head, blinking. It was early morning, and the sky was pale and cloudy. The sobbing continued from the clearing, and he rose to his paws, glancing down at Poppywing before making his way to the entrance of the den.

When he stepped outside, he saw what was happening with a pang of sadness. Silverblossom was near the thorn tunnel, trying to push her way through as Dewpaw, Diamondpaw, and Crowmask blocked her.

"Let me go find him!" Silverblossom was sobbing. "This isn't right! He should be buried."

Crowmask gently pushed her back with his paw. "I know, but that

fox would have slaughtered him," He told her quietly. "You don't want to see him like that."

"That's right," Dewpaw added, his eyes filled with heartache as he stared at his distressed mother. "We have to remember Stormstar as he was. That's what he would want."

At last, Silverblossom gave up and slumped into a sitting position, hanging her head. Dewpaw and Diamondpaw pressed against her reassuringly, while Crowmask watched them solemnly.

Rainheart hesitantly crossed the clearing and approached the medicine cat apprentice. "Dewpaw, I'm sorry to interrupt, but how is Bluerain?" He asked quietly, casting Silverblossom a sympathetic look.

"She's fine," Dewpaw told him quietly. "Her wounds will heal. She just needs some rest." He paused. "You can go see her if you like. Carrottail is already there."

He nodded and turned away, quickly padding to the medicine den. When he entered, he saw Bluerain laying in a nest of moss, her shoulder and belly wounds plastered in cobwebs. Carrottail was settled beside her, his yellow eyes filled with worry.

"I don't know, Carrottail..." Bluerain was meowing uncertainly. When she noticed Rainheart, she turned her head, and Carrottail followed her gaze. "Hello, Rainheart. Are you alright?"

He nodded and sat down with his parents. "I'm fine." He stared at her worriedly. "How are you feeling?"

"A bit sore, but I'll be alright." Bluerain told him.

Carrottail looked at her sadly. "Thank StarClan it wasn't worse, Bluerain. Please, won't you retire with me? Neither of us are as young as we used to be. What if next time, you aren't so lucky?"

As she stared at him, he reached out and rested his paw on hers. "We could spend the rest of our days in the elders den, watching Rainheart and Bloomfire be the best warriors in ShadowClan. We could tell stories to our grandkits, because StarClan knows they're

both having some." He added with an amused look at Rainheart, who grew hot with embarrassment.

I'd love to have kits with Poppywing. He thought, his heart warming as he imagined tiny gray and red bundles of fur. *They'd be the best kits ShadowClan has ever seen.* But as he returned to the situation at hand, his spirits saddened as he imagined Bluerain moving into the elders den. It wasn't easy to accept or even notice that his parents were growing old. Yet every cat retired eventually. But no cat was ever prepared when the time came.

Bluerain stared back at Carrottail, looking unsure. "That sounds lovely," She admitted quietly. "I'll think about it."

"Look, they're back!"

Rainheart's ears flicked back at Cliffshade's exclamation. With a nod to his parents, he turned and exited the den.

Many cats were padding out of their dens, murmuring excitedly to one another. Hawkfeather had just entered the camp, followed by Depthwater. His dark fur looked more blue than usual in the morning light, and his eyes shone with determination and pride. They had just returned from the moonstone.

As more cats gathered, Hawkfeather spoke loud and clear for every cat to hear. "StarClan has granted him nine lives." He stepped back and dipped his head to his companion. "Let us welcome home the new leader of ShadowClan, Depthstar."

"Depthstar! Depthstar!" The clan cheered. The dark tom raised his head proudly as he embraced the moment.

"Depthstar!"

Snakekit, Brownkit, and Blackkit bounded out of the nursery and darted around their father's paws, their little tails high with excitement. Sunflower followed them, her eyes glowing.

"You're clan leader now!" Blackkit squeaked excitedly. "That's awesome!"

Snakekit's green eyes were alight with joy. "You'll chase off any mean rogues that dare threaten ShadowClan!"

"Who's deputy? I want to be deputy!" Brownkit exclaimed.

As Depthstar chuckled, Sunflower joined them, purring in amusement. "Don't be silly! Kits can't be deputies." She rested her warm gaze on her mate and stepped forward, giving him a nuzzle. "I'm so proud of you. You'll be a wonderful leader."

Depthstar gave her cheek a lick and let out a purr."I'll be the best leader I can be." He paused and padded across the clearing, leaping onto the meeting rock. "But I can't do it alone."

As Rainheart gathered with the other warriors below the rock, he realized what Depthstar's next step was. *He's going to choose a deputy!* He studied the cats around him, wondering who it would be. *Perhaps Crowmask or Maplefur?*

"I'll need a deputy to stand by my side. A cat who is wise, loyal, and determined to protect our clan." Depthstar paused, studying the cats below as though making sure of his decision. "I say these words before StarClan, so that the spirits of our warrior ancestors may hear and approve of my choice. The new deputy of ShadowClan is Cobratail."

Many cats murmured in surprise, and even Rainheart was startled. *Cobratail? Poppywing's brother?*

"Me?" Cobratail's amber eyes lit with shock as his name was spoken. "Depthstar, I'm truly honored, but I've only been a warrior for a few moons. Are you sure I'm the right cat?"

Crowmask nodded agreement. "That's right," He meowed. "I mean no disrespect, Depthstar, but Cobratail is very young. He hasn't even had an apprentice!"

"He trained Poisonedsap when she joined the clan," Rosebreeze reminded him.

The black warrior glanced at her sharply. "Does that even count?"

"That's enough," Depthstar meowed, and the warriors fell silent. "Cobratail, you may be young. But that means that you have the energy that is needed to defend our clan. Despite your age, you are wise, determined, and loyal. There is no cat I'd rather have as my deputy."

For a heartbeat, Cobratail stared up at his leader, still taken back by his words. After a moment, he stood, his eyes lighting with pride and determination. "I would be honored, Depthstar."

"Cobratail! Cobratail!"

The clan began chanting his name, and Rainheart joined in, watching the black and red tom as his clanmates congratulated him. *Poppywing will be so happy for him.*

"Cobratail!"

Coincidentally enough, he turned to see that Poppywing had awoken and was rushing toward her brother, purring and touching her nose to his. "Congratulations! You'll be an amazing deputy."

Cobratail let out a purr and rested his chin on her head. "Thanks, Poppywing. I'll do my best."

She stepped back and stared at him, pretending to be serious. "You'd better not put me on patrols all the time now just because I'm your sister."

Cobratail snorted in amusement, his eyes gleaming. "No promises!"

"Before I call this meeting to an end," Depthstar began speaking again, and every cat looked up at him once more. "I'd like to make Flamepaw, Copperpaw, and Timberpaw warriors. They fought bravely in the fight against the fox, and that's enough of an assessment to me."

The brothers exchanged excited looks before they quickly moved to the front of the crowd, looking up at their new leader. Milkblaze watched his apprentice proudly, and Silverblossom sat beside him. Though she tried to look happy, her eyes were still dull with grief for Stormstar. Bluerain watched from outside the medicine den,

Carrottail at her side.

"I, Depthstar, leader of ShadowClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices." Depthstar gazed down at them as he spoke. "They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn."

He rested his gaze on the first apprentice. "Flamepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," Flamepaw meowed confidently. Behind him, Bloomfire watched from the crowd, her eyes shining with pride.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name." Depthstar meowed. "Flamepaw, from this moment on you will be known as Flameheart. StarClan honors your courage and compassion, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ShadowClan."

"Flameheart! Flameheart!" The clan cheered.

"Flameheart!" Bloomfire purred and rushed to his side, giving him a nuzzle. He purred loudly and twined his tail with hers.

They're finally warriors together. Rainheart thought, his heart warm with happiness for his sister. I'm sure I'll be seeing a lot less of her now that she can spend time with Flameheart.

As they moved aside, Depthstar went on. "Copperpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," Copperpaw purred.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Copperpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Copperstripe. StarClan honors your loyalty and skill, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ShadowClan."

"Copperstripe! Copperstripe!"

The last apprentice, Timberpaw, stepped forward. He looked up as Depthstar spoke. "Timberpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do." Timberpaw hesitated. "I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't interrupt, but I have a request."

The clan murmured to one another in surprise, and Flameheart exchanged a confused look with Copperstripe. Rainheart stared at Timberpaw curiously. *This never happens. What could it be?*

Depthstar blinked in surprise, but gave a nod. "Yes, Timberpaw?"

The tabby apprentice hesitated before clearing his throat and meeting his leader's gaze. "I would have died yesterday if Stormstar hadn't sacrificed himself to the fox." He meowed. "I owe him my life. I would like to be called Timberstorm, in honor of Stormstar."

The clan spoke quietly at this, many giving him nods of approval. Silverblossom's eyes flooded with emotion as she watched Timberpaw.

Depthstar dipped his head, respect filling his gaze. "Very well. I'm sure that Stormstar is honored." He raised his head. "By the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Timberpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Timberstorm. StarClan honors your spirit and courage, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ShadowClan."

"Timberstorm! Timberstorm!"

The clan cheered his name louder than they had Flameheart and Copperstripe, perhaps because in a way, they were cheering for Stormstar as well.

We will never forget Stormstar. Rainheart thought solemnly. *But Depthstar will be a great leader.*

Chapter 4

Rainheart lay against Poppywing by the side of the clearing, basking in the sunlight. The two cats purred loudly as they relaxed together, watching their clanmates contently.

Hawkfeather and Dewpaw were organizing herbs by the entrance to the medicine den, laying out oak leaves in the sunlight. Maplefur and Poisonedsap lay near the warriors den. The creamy tabby was grooming her golden brown fur, but she looked far from comfortable.

"It's a lovely day today," Poppywing purred, her blue eyes shining. "The heat feels nice."

Rainheart purred his agreement and licked her ear. "It feels great, especially when you're here with me."

As Poppywing began lapping at his fur, he saw Cobratail pad to the center of the clearing, surveying his clanmates. Three moons had passed since Stormstar's death. Depthstar was proving himself a worthy successor of the previous leader of ShadowClan. And though many cats had doubted Cobratail due to his youth, the red and black tom quickly proved them wrong. He was as wise as any cat twice his age, and carried out his duties as well as any deputy.

A quarter moon ago, Bluerain had made the decision to retire and move into the elders den. It had been difficult for Rainheart to see his mother give up her warrior duties. But after recent events, she'd felt that it was best for her. Carrottail seemed more than pleased to be able to share a nest with his mate again.

Rainheart looked toward the elders den and saw his parents now, laying outside the den together. Blackkit and Brownkit sat in front of them as Carrottail spoke.

"I was out on patrol with Crowmask, Rosebreeze, and Cliffshade," The orange tabby was meowing to the kits. "Then out of nowhere

came the rogues, even Bone Shred himself!"

Blackkit let out a gasp. "What did you do?"

Beside him, Brownkit let out a playful growl. "You ripped him to shreds, didn't you?"

"Oh, no," Carrottail shook his head. Bluerain watched him, her eyes warm with amusement as he went on. "We were outnumbered. We fought as hard as we could, but we were doomed. Just when we thought we were done for, your father, Depthstar arrived! He was Depthwater then. He came with his own patrol, and together we fought off the rogues!"

Brownkit gave a little bounce. "Yeah! Rogues don't have a chance against warriors!"

"Warriors rule!" Blackkit cheered.

Bluerain chuckled and looked at her mate. "You're a very good storyteller," She purred.

"Don't worry, soon you will be too." He gave her a flick on the shoulder with his tail, then returned his gaze to the kits. "Now, have I told you about the time me and Bluerain fought off a badger?"

"No! Tell us!"

As Carrottail began telling his next story, Rainheart noticed Sunflower sitting by the nursery, watching her kits from a distance. A look of sadness and loss filled her eyes. Depthstar padded up to her, murmuring something. Sunflower shut her eyes and pressed her head into his neck fur.

Many days ago, a rogue came to ShadowClan with her three starving kits, begging them to give the kits a home. Depthstar had decided to take them in. Though many questioned if the kits came from Bone Shred's gang, Depthstar dismissed this possibility with the fact that the kits didn't carry the scent of twolegplace.

Sunflower had taken in the three named Deserve, Boost, and Song to raise with her own kits. Everything seemed fine until just a few

days ago, when the clan made a horrific discovery. Just outside the camp, Deserve had killed Snakekit, then ran away. Every cat had been stunned that a kit would commit murder, and many cats wanted Boost and Song thrown out of the clan.

But Depthstar insisted that whatever their brother had done wasn't their fault. Boost and Song had been allowed to stay, however Sunflower refused to even look at the kits whose brother had killed her son. But Milkblaze had defended the kits and supported them like a father. Though Boost and Song were terrified at the clan's distrust and devastated at the loss of Deserve, Milkblaze seemed to make them feel safe and help them cope with the recent tragedy.

And that wasn't the only loss in ShadowClan. Just after the kits were taken into the clan, a badger attack had cost Silverblossom her life. Dewpaw and Diamondpaw grieved deeply for the loss of their mother, so soon after Stormstar's death.

She's with Stormstar now. Rainheart thought. *They're hunting together in StarClan, just as Silverblossom said they would.*

Ashcloud and Greenpine's kits had recently been made apprentices. One of the newest warriors, Flameheart, had received the playful and fun Stripedpaw as an apprentice. Cougarfoot became mentor to Mottledpaw, and Crowmask to Foxpaw.

Strangely enough, just after their kits were apprenticed, Ashcloud and Greenpine stopped being mates. No cat was sure what had happened between them. But there seemed to be no hard feelings between the two cats. Rainheart supposed that as long as they were on good terms, whatever had split them up wasn't anything serious.

"Hey, Rainheart!"

He broke out of his thoughts and looked up to see Bloomfire and Flameheart padding toward them, their pelts brushing. Stripedpaw trotted happily alongside his mentor. His sister's green eyes shone with happiness as they reached them. "Flameheart is going out for a hunting session with Stripedpaw," She meowed. "I'm going along. Would you and Poppywing like to join us?"

"That sounds great!" Rainheart purred, then hesitated, turning to his mate. "If you'd like to, of course."

Poppywing looked at him warmly. "Of course!" She rose to her paws, and he quickly joined her, arching his back as he stretched.

"Great!" Flameheart purred and turned away. "Come on, Stripedpaw. You'll get to learn from four warriors today."

Stripedpaw's tail was high in the air. "Awesome!" He hurried after his mentor, and Bloomfire, Rainheart, and Poppywing followed.

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"Very good! Now show me your hunting crouch."

Flameheart watched as Stripedpaw dropped into a crouch. "Like this?" He prompted, his eyes flashing up to his mentor.

The ginger tabby crouched beside him, studying his position. "Very good," He praised. "Just remember not to let your tail touch the ground. If it brushes against leaves or twigs, you'll give yourself away."

"Oh, right." Stripedpaw quickly lifted his tail from the ground.

Rainheart sat between Poppywing and Bloomfire near the trunk of a pine tree, watching as Flameheart instructed his apprentice. *I wonder if I'll ever have an apprentice?* He thought.

Beside him, Bloomfire let out a purr. "Flameheart is such a great mentor," She meowed warmly as she gazed at him. "Isn't he?"

"Yes," Poppywing purred and exchanged a warm look with Rainheart. His sister made it very clear how much she admired Flameheart. "Rainheart will be too."

He shook his head. "You'll be a much better mentor than I could ever be. You're the best hunter in ShadowClan," He reminded her with a purr.

As Poppywing gently flicked him on the shoulder with her tail,

Bloomfire flicked her ear back at a rustling sound and turned her head, looking up into the branches of the tree. "There's a bird up there," She commented.

"Is there?" Poppywing's ears pricked forward, and she turned to face the trunk, peering up into the tree. "Not for long!" With a mighty leap, she was on the first branch of the tree, making her way up the trunk.

She's so talented and brave. Rainheart thought as he watched her admiringly. *She could catch anything!*

"Whoa!" Stripedpaw had forgotten about his hunting lesson, his blue eyes wide as he stared up after her. "Look at Poppywing go!"

Flameheart followed his apprentice's gaze. "That's Poppywing for you," He purred. "She's part squirrel."

She was halfway up the tree now, her tail hanging from the branch she was crouched on. Her attention was fixed on a sparrow perched on another branch above her.

Rainheart felt himself tense as he watched her. Though he'd seen her hunt in the treetops many times before, he still worried about the possibility of her falling. *She could break a paw, a leg... She could fall to her death.* The thought of losing her terrified him. He gave himself a shake. *Poppywing isn't going anywhere.* He told himself.

He waited for Poppywing to leap at the bird. But suddenly, she hesitated and began climbing back down the tree. Above her, the bird flew away.

What? Rainheart blinked, surprised. *She could have caught that!* It wasn't like Poppywing to give up on a catch.

"Huh?" Stripedpaw stared up in confusion. "Why didn't she catch it?"

When Poppywing reached the lowest branch, she leaped back onto the ground, looking embarrassed. "I'm sorry, that was silly of me."

"What happened?" Rainheart stepped forward, staring at her

anxiously. "Are you okay?"

The reddish tabby purred. "Yes, Rainheart, I'm fine. I just... I didn't want to risk it."

"Risk what?" Rainheart stared at her, puzzled. *She's never been afraid of falling before. Did something happen?*

Poppywing hesitated, casting a look at the others. "Would you excuse us? I'd like to talk to Rainheart alone."

"Of course." Flameheart dipped his head and turned away, flicking his tail. "Come on, Stripedpaw. We'll try hunting frogs in the marsh."

His apprentice hesitated before following. Bloomfire cast Rainheart and Poppywing a worried look before she turned and joined Stripedpaw and Flameheart.

Poppywing sat down and watched until the three cats disappeared through the trees. Rainheart stared at her, his stomach turning with anxiety. *Something is wrong. What is it? Is she hurt? Does she not want to be mates anymore? Oh, StarClan!*

She met his gaze, and Rainheart's fur prickled. "What is it?" He asked worriedly. "What's wrong?"

To his surprise, she let out a purr. "Nothing is wrong, Rainheart." She leaned forward and licked his ear. "I've been meaning to tell you something. I wanted to wait until I was sure."

Sure about what? He blinked at her curiously. "What is it?" He asked, his heart pounding nervously.

Poppywing gazed at him for a moment before letting out a purr. "I'm expecting kits."

For a moment, Rainheart just stared back at her, his mind blanking as he tried to understand her words. *Kits?* His heart skipped a beat, then began to race. *Kits!* "Really?" He gasped. "Our kits?"

She snorted in amusement. "Yes, *our* kits! Who else's?"

For a moment, he remained frozen. Then he let out a purr and pushed forward, rubbing his head against hers. "I can't believe it!" He blurted out excitedly. "That's fantastic!"

A loud purr rumbled in Poppywing's throat as she nuzzled his neck fur. "I'm so excited," She meowed happily. "You're going to be a great father."

"I hope so," He purred and licked her head. "You'll be an even better mother." His heart swelled with warmth and excitement, spreading through his whole body. *We're having kits! I'm going to be a father!* Suddenly, the world around him changed into something new and exciting. Nothing felt more perfect. "Our kits will be the best ShadowClan has ever seen!"

Chapter 5

Rainheart pelted into the camp, holding a mouse in his jaws. As he raced through the clearing, he nearly crashed into Cougarfoot, who reared back just in time.

"Great StarClan, slow down!" The golden brown tom exclaimed from behind him.

Sorry! Rainheart thought, unable to respond with a mouth full of mouse. He ducked his head as he slipped into the nursery.

Poppywing lay in her nest of moss, her chin rested on her paws. When she heard Rainheart's arrival, she raised her head and purred warmly. "Hello, my love."

He dropped the mouse in front of her and let out a purr, sitting down. "I caught this just for you."

"Thanks, Rainheart," She purred and lowered her head, taking a bite out of the mouse.

On the other side of the den, Poisonedsap lay in her nest, watching them. By her belly suckled her two newborn kits, Stonekit and Swiftkit. They had just been born yesterday. Both were black and white toms, though Stonekit was more white than black, unlike his brother.

"You're back again?" Poisonedsap snorted as she narrowed her amber eyes at him. "You were just here this morning!"

Poppywing had been in the nursery for over a moon now. Every day, Rainheart tried to visit her as often as he possibly could when he wasn't on patrols, bringing her prey, water, and fresh moss for her nest. He knew that Poppywing missed being able to go hunting. He wanted to keep her company and make sure that she was comfortable. The kits were due any day now.

Rainheart dipped his head to the queen. "What's wrong with that?" He demanded. "I'm excited for my kits."

For a moment, Poisonedsap didn't respond. Then, she lashed her tail and rolled her eyes. "If Maplefur were barging in here as often as you, I'd shred his ears," She muttered and looked down at her kits.

"Stop acting like a grumpy old badger, Poisonedsap," Poppywing purred, and the former rogue shot her a glare. "I like it when Rainheart visits."

"Maybe *you* do." The golden brown she-cat grunted. "The sooner these kits arrive, the sooner he'll stop being a nuisance."

Rainheart was too excited to let Poisonedsap offend him. He was going to be a father, and nothing could crush his happiness about that. All that mattered was he, Poppywing, and their future kits. Nothing else felt as important, and certainly not Poisonedsap's opinion.

"Do you need anything else, Poppywing?" He prompted, gazing at her warmly. "I'll find whatever you want, you name it!"

The red tabby let out a purr. "I'm fine Rainheart, thank you."

"Rainheart!" Bloomfire poked her head into the den. "Cobratail wants to know if you'd like to join a patrol. You spend so much time in here, you're starting to smell like a queen."

He let out an amused purr. "Very funny." He hesitated. "I should stay with Poppy-"

"Rainheart, go on," Poppywing gently nudged him. "I love seeing you, but you can't avoid your duties. I'll be here when you get back."

He hesitated for a long moment, then sighed. "Alright, I will." He gazed at her lovingly. "I'll see you later." He lowered his head and touched his nose to hers before turning away.

As he followed Bloomfire out into the clearing, she looked at him in amusement. "Any cat would think you're the one having the kits,"

She commented. Rainheart shot her a look, and she purred. "I'm just teasing." Her eyes warmed. "I'm happy for you."

"Thanks, Bloomfire," He meowed happily, gently nudging his sister. "Did Cobratail really want me for a patrol, or were you just trying to get me out of the nursery?"

"He does," The orange and white she-cat purred. She led him to the center of the clearing where Cobratail stood, surrounded by warriors.

When the clan deputy spotted them, he dipped his head. "Ah, Rainheart. How is Poppywing today?" He asked. He too was interested in the arrival of his sister's kits.

"She's fine," Rainheart told him. "The kits should arrive any day now."

Cobratail nodded and purred. "We all can't wait." He paused before adding. "Cougarfoot is leading a patrol to refresh the scent markers along the ThunderClan border. Would you like to join them?"

"Sure," He dipped his head and padded over to the golden brown warrior. He was joined by Cliffshade, Greenpine, and the newest warrior, Diamondrain.

The day after Poppywing had told Rainheart she was expecting kits, Diamondrain had been made a warrior. And just last moon, her brother, Dewstorm had earned his full medicine cat name. Sunflower's two kits, Blackpaw and Brownpaw, had been made apprentices.

Cougarfoot gave him an irritated, but mildly amused look, and Rainheart ducked his head in embarrassment. "Err I'm sorry I almost knocked you over earlier."

"That's alright," The warrior purred in amusement. He turned to the other members of the patrol. "Come on."

***

The sun shone high in the sky as Rainheart padded through the

forest with the patrol. Diamondrain and Greenpine spoke together quietly, while Cliffshade joined his brother at the head of the group, sniffing at the grass.

"Wait." Cougarfoot suddenly stopped, raising his tail to the others and studying their surroundings.

They halted, and Diamondrain's eyes widened. "What is it?" She whispered.

Before Cougarfoot could respond, Cliffshade raised his head and bristled, his nostrils flaring as he sniffed at the air. "Fox." He growled.

Rainheart quickly picked up the scent and felt his fur prickle with unease. He remembered the fight with the two foxes that had cost Stormstar his life all those moons ago. He certainly didn't want to see a fox again anytime soon. "It's fresh," He commented uneasily.

"It must be living in our territory," Greenpine realized, her green eyes flashing with alarm. "Do you suppose it's the same one that killed Stormstar?"

"It could be," Cougarfoot meowed grimly. "We'd better check it out. Every cat, stay close." He slowly headed onward, and Cliffshade and Greenpine fell in behind him.

Diamondrain hesitated, her eyes filled with unease, and Rainheart stepped to her side. "Don't worry," He told her quietly. "There are five of us. A fox would be mouse brained to attack us."

She slowly nodded. "That's true..." She followed Greenpine, and Rainheart joined her. He couldn't deny the fact that he was a bit nervous too. He and Diamondrain had to be the weakest cats on the patrol. But Cougarfoot, Cliffshade, and Greenpine were strong and skilled fighters. He felt ashamed to think that he was relying on them for protection.

The forest was eerily quiet as they slowly headed through the trees. Rainheart glanced around him warily, half expecting a fox to leap out of the bushes at them. Suddenly, Cougarfoot stopped in his

tracks, and Cliffshade stopped just before he bumped into him.

"What is-" Greenpine began.

"Quiet!" Cougarfoot hissed, and she fell silent. Rainheart peered over Greenpine's head and felt his fur prickle. Up ahead was a badger's den. With a start, Rainheart remembered it. The den had belonged to the badger that had killed Silverblossom several moons ago. The badger had abandoned the den, but it seemed that something else had made it their home.

Greenpine's eyes widened. "That's the abandoned badger den," She breathed.

"Yes," Cliffshade growled lowly. "And it looks like that rotten fox has moved into it."

This isn't good. Rainheart thought worriedly. *That fox has made a home here. And it doesn't look like it's leaving anytime soon.*

"Should we take a look?" Cliffshade asked, his eyes narrowed.

Cougarfoot shook his head. "No. We don't know if the fox is inside right now. And I'm not too keen on meeting it." He turned to the others. "Come on. We'll return to camp and report it to Depthstar. Every cat should avoid this area until we figure out how to drive the fox away."

As the cats turned away, Rainheart hesitated, looking back at the fox den. *If any cat got near that den, the fox would tear them apart.* He thought uneasily. *I hope I never have to face it.* With a shudder, he turned and hurried after the others.

Chapter 6

A crescent moon hung like a claw in the night sky. Rainheart tossed and turned in his nest, struggling to get comfortable. Though his eyelids were heavy with exhaustion, he found himself restless and unable to sleep. He couldn't stop thinking about Poppywing and their future kits.

They'll be born any day now. He thought, feeling a wave of excitement wash over him. *What will they look like? How many toms? How many she-cats? What will we name them?*

"Rainheart, for StarClan's sake!" Copperstripe whispered from his nest, and Rainheart turned to see that he had sent a tuft of moss flying into the golden warrior's face. He sneezed and glared at him. "Will you please stay still and sleep?"

He flattened his ears. "Sorry." He rested his chin on his paws and let out a sigh. It was silent for a long moment. *This is hopeless.* He thought. *I'll never get any sleep.* He decided to visit Poppywing in the nursery. He rose to his paws and started to make his way around the sleeping cats toward the entrance of the den.

He accidentally stepped on Crowmask's tail, and his black head shot up, his eyes flaring. "Rainheart, I swear to-"

"I'm going, I'm going!" Rainheart hissed at him, mildly amused. He continued walking as Crowmask huffed out a sigh and settled back down in his nest, closing his eyes.

Rainheart stepped out of the den, feeling the refreshing, cool night air brush his pelt. No cat was in the clearing. He padded across to the nursery and peered inside.

Poisonedsap was curled up in her nest, asleep with her tail curled around her two kits. Across from her was his beloved Poppywing, her red fur like crimson in the darkness. She lay with her tail wrapped around her and her chin on her paws.

She seemed to be awake and raised her head slowly, blinking warmly when she saw him. "Rainheart," She purred softly. "What are you doing here?"

His heart warmed as he padded into the den and settled beside her. "I just wanted to see you," He murmured, gazing at her happily. "How are you feeling?"

"I feel great," Poppywing told him. "I have the best mate in the clan, and I'm having kits soon. How could I not be?" She paused, her eyes gleaming with amusement. "You'd better be quiet. If Poisonedsap wakes up and sees you, she'll be grumpier than ever."

Rainheart let out an amused purr and rested his head against hers. "I can't wait," He whispered. "I'll visit our kits every day until they're made apprentices."

"I know you will," She murmured, her blue eyes filled with warmth. "We'll watch them grow up together and be there for them every step of the way."

"Of course." Rainheart licked her cheek. "Always." He curled up against her and closed his eyes. He felt her purring against him, and he joined in, feeling happiness spread through his body as he dozed off. *The day these kits arrive will be the best day of my life.*

***

The day seemed to be painfully slow. After waking up, Rainheart had been chosen to go on the dawn patrol with Bloomfire, Timberstorm, and Rosebreeze. He'd been distracted most of the time, daydreaming about what his kits would be like. But no cat got angry with him. All three seemed to understand his excitement.

It was sunhigh when they returned to camp. Rainheart went straight to the nursery, eager to see Poppywing. When he ducked inside, he saw her sitting up in her nest. She and Poisonedsap were watching Stonekit and Swiftkit intently.

When Poppywing noticed Rainheart, she let out a purr, her eyes bright. "Rainheart, look! Stonekit and Swiftkit have opened their

eyes."

He looked at the kits and saw Stonekit blinking tiny amber eyes. His brother, Swiftkit, turned his head, revealing light blue ones.

"Stonekit has amber eyes like you, Poisonedsap," Poppywing commented warmly. When the queen didn't respond, Poppywing turned to Rainheart. "What color eyes do you think-"

She suddenly broke off, her eyes flashing with alarm. She dropped into a crouch, and Rainheart shot to her side, his heart skipping a beat. "Poppywing? What's wrong?"

For a moment, she didn't respond. "I... I think-" She gasped and slumped onto her side, breathing quickly.

It's time! Rainheart felt frozen for a moment, then snapped out of it, looking down at her anxiously. "Hold on, I'll get Hawkfeather!" He spun and shot out of the den and across the clearing to the medicine den.

"Hawkfeather!" He staggered to a halt in the entrance of the den. "Dewstorm! Come quick!"

The medicine cats looked up at him in surprise from where they were sorting herbs. "What's-" Hawkfeather began.

"Poppywing is kitting!" Rainheart gasped and spun before he could hear their response, pelting back across the clearing.

"Rainheart?" Rosebreeze blinked as he whisked past her, and beside her, Copperstripe started to speak.

He ignored them and raced into the nursery, crouching beside Poppywing. She lay on her side in her nest, her flanks heaving. "It's okay, Hawkfeather is coming!" He told her, licking her cheek.

"O-okay." Poppywing flicked her gaze at him, and despite the pain she was in, she looked happy. "Our kits will be here soon."

As Rainheart's heart raced in a mixture of excitement and anxiety, he heard quick pawsteps behind him and turned to see that

Hawkfeather and Dewstorm had arrived.

As Hawkfeather crouched beside him, Dewstorm turned to the other queen. "Poisonedsap, would you please take your kits outside for now?" He asked. "We need room."

The golden brown she-cat's eyes flashed with protest, but she huffed out a sigh. "I suppose," She growled and stood, gently nudging her kits and guiding them out of the den.

When she left, Dewstorm moved to Rainheart's side and rested his paw on Poppywing's flank. "The kits are definitely coming," He told her.

"Rainheart, why don't you wait outside?" Hawkfeather suggested. "I don't think you want to see her like this."

He opened his jaws to protest, but realized that he was right. He didn't want to see Poppywing in pain. *But I have to be here for her!* He looked down at his mate anxiously. "Do you want me to stay?"

Poppywing hesitated. "I don't- don't want to worry you," She rasped between breaths. "I-It's okay."

As Rainheart continued to hesitate, Dewstorm looked at him. "We'll let you know as soon as the kits arrive," He told him. "Don't worry."

"Okay..." He stared at Poppywing for a long moment. "I'll see you soon." He turned and stepped out of the den.

He was surprised to see many cats in the clearing watching him curiously. Ashcloud was the closest, sitting beside Copperstripe. "Poppywing is kitting?" He guessed. Rainheart nodded, trembling nervously.

"That's great!" Maplefur purred. "Don't worry, it won't take long."

It already feels like it's been long enough! Rainheart thought, but blinked gratefully at Maplefur. As the warrior padded away, he sat down, looking over his shoulder. He couldn't see Poppywing, only the backs of the medicine cats. *Why am I so nervous? The kits are coming! Everything will be fine.* He found himself digging his claws

into the ground, his tail swishing impatiently.

Eventually, he found himself unable to keep still and began pacing back and forth outside the nursery, looking in every so often to catch a glimpse of his mate. *I hope she's alright... Does she need me?*

"Great StarClan, Rainheart! Stay still for a moment!"

Bloomfire's meow caught his attention, and he paused, resisting the urge to continue pacing. He turned to see his sister sitting with Flameheart not far from him, her eyes gleaming with amusement.

"I can't help it," He admitted, his heart pounding in his chest. "I'm so nervous, but excited!" He paused, his anxiety peaking, and he turned to the nursery, poking his head in. "Hawkfeather, how is-"

"For StarClan's sake, Rainheart, keep your fur on!" Hawkfeather responded sharply. "You act like she's the first cat ever to kit!"

Well, he's not going to tell me anything. Rainheart huffed out a sigh and stepped back, sitting down. A moment later, Dewstorm poked his head out, and he looked up, his heart skipping a beat. *Have the kits arrived?*

"Don't mind Hawkfeather," Dewstorm told him quietly. "He gets cranky when he's focused. Poppywing is going to be fine."

Rainheart hesitated and shuffled his paws. "I know, but-"

"Bloomfire, why don't you talk to your brother?" Dewstorm purred, looking past Rainheart. "If he doesn't get his mind on something else soon and stop pacing, I'm afraid his paws are going to fall off!"

As Rainheart let out a sigh, Bloomfire purred. "Of course." He glanced back, and she waved her tail at him as Dewstorm retreated back into the nursery. "Rainheart, come here."

He reluctantly padded over and sat beside his sister. *You'd be nervous too if your mate was kitting!* He thought. He looked over his shoulder sharply as he heard Poppywing yowl softly. *Oh, StarClan...*

"What has you so worried?" Bloomfire prompted, and he slowly

returned his attention to her. "I've never seen you like this."

Rainheart hesitated, the anxiety churning in his stomach. He decided to confess his fears to his sister. "I'm just worried about Poppywing," He admitted. "What if something goes wrong? Will the kits like me?"

Her eyes softened. "Rainheart-"

He stared at her anxiously. "Do you think I'll be a good father?"

"Of course you will," Bloomfire promised. She paused, her eyes gleaming teasingly. "You're a bit young to be having kits though, aren't you?"

Rainheart let out an amused purr, feeling his stress ease. "Well, you will be too," He pointed out teasingly, curling his tail. "Every cat in ShadowClan has noticed you and Flameheart."

His sister's eyes widened, and Flameheart let out a purr, giving his chest a few embarrassed licks. "Oh, well," Bloomfire purred, flustured. "Maybe."

Another yowl sounded from the nursery, but Rainheart tried to ignore it. *I don't want to think about Poppywing in pain.* He was rather enjoying conversing with his sister. He was grateful for her company. *I need her more than ever now, to distract me.*

He perked up at a delightful thought, looking at Bloomfire and Flameheart happily. "If you hurry up, maybe our kits can play together, and train together!"

Bloomfire exchanged an affectionate glance with Flameheart and wrapped her tail around him. "Maybe," She purred.

It's much more than a maybe. Rainheart thought in amusement. He was about to say more when a yowl broke out from behind him, much louder than the previous ones. A sharp cry of pain followed it.

It sent a bolt of shock through his body, and he spun around, his heart nearly leaping out of his chest as he bristled. "Poppywing?" He gasped.

"Dewstorm, get some cobwebs!" Came Hawkfeather's voice, rich with panic. "Hurry!"

Cobwebs? That means... Rainheart bolted forward, pushing his head into the den as panic siezed his body. Dewstorm was clawing up a wad of cobwebs from the corner of the den. "What's going on?" He demanded anxiously.

"Rainheart, get out!" Hawkfeather snapped from where he crouched over Poppywing, sniffing her and gently pawing her belly. "Now!"

"Why?" He could hardly get the word out, feeling dizzy with panic as he struggled to see past Hawkfeather. *Something's wrong!* He gulped. "Is she okay?"

When no one answered him, he started forward, only to have Dewstorm shoulder him out of the den. He staggered back, stunned as the normally gentle medicine cat hissed at him. "Stay out of our way!" His eyes flared with alarm. "We need room to work. We'll save her."

"Save her?" The words sent shrill terror bolting through his body. *She's hurt! Something's wrong!* His head spun as he struggled to think straight. "Save her? What's wrong?" He gasped, but Dewstorm didn't respond. "Poppywing!" He yowled and surged forward.

Dewstorm shoved him back again. "Please, stay out of the way!" He urged.

No! My mate is in there, and something is wrong! A mixture of fury and terror numbed his body, and he let out a snarl, unsheathing his claws and preparing to lash out at the medicine cat. *You get out of my way!*

"Rainheart!"

He was about to slash at Dewstorm when paws gripped him and pulled him backwards. He stumbled back and spun, glaring at the cat who had grabbed him. He found himself staring at Bloomfire's alarmed face. Beside her, Flameheart stared at Rainheart in shock.

I nearly attacked a medicine cat. Rainheart trembled on his paws,

his heart pounding hard in his chest. "Something's wrong!" He choked, unable to hide his fear. "I have to be there!" He turned toward the den again.

Bloomfire intercepted him and sat down, wrapping her tail around him. "It's alright!" She soothed, her voice filled with concern. "Hawkfeather and Dewstorm will take care of everything. It's going to be okay."

She gently began lapping at his fur, but he was unable to relax. He kept his anxious gaze fixed on the nursery as he trembled against his sister, his fur bristling in fear. *Oh, StarClan, let Poppywing be okay!*

"It's okay, Rainheart," Flameheart meowed, staring at him in concern. "Hawkfeather and Dewstorm are good medicine cats. They've handled plenty of kittings before."

That's true... Rainheart thought, though he still felt anxious. *I trust them. But that doesn't make me any less afraid for Poppywing.* He couldn't wait until this ordeal was over, and he could race into the nursery and comfort her. He'd cover her with licks and curl himself around her while they admired their newborn kits. He drew in a shaky breath and shut his eyes. *It's okay. It'll be over soon.*

A quiet cry caught his attention, and he jerked away from Bloomfire, stepping toward the nursery. *Oh Poppywing, what's happening in there?* His heart thudded in his chest as he trembled, his body rigid with anxiety.

Suddenly, Hawkfeather's face appeared at the entrance of the den. "Rainheart," He began.

He immediately bolted into the nursery. The scent of blood filled his nose, and his veins turned to ice the second he saw her. He let out a horrified cry. "No!"

Poppywing lay on her side in the nest of moss, her eyes closed as she breathed slowly and unevenly. Blood pooled out from between her legs, soaking the moss in crimson.

No! He shoved his way past the medicine cats and felt his shaky legs almost give out from under him as he crouched over Poppywing, lapping at her cheek fiercely. "Stay with me!" He cried.

Her eyes parted slightly at his voice, her blue eyes glazed and unfocused as she met his terrified stare. "I'm sorry..." She rasped so quietly, he hardly heard it. "Goodbye..."

Goodbye? No! His heart throbbed with despair as her eyes closed again. "No! Stay with me!" He pleaded and pressed his muzzle into her fur. "Poppywing!"

She didn't respond. Her flanks stopped heaving, and she went still. *No... She can't be gone!* Rainheart trembled as he raised his head and stared at her face, his heart as heavy as a stone as it pounded in his chest like thunder throughout his entire body.

"Poppywing?" He whimpered as he stared at her closed eye, waiting, praying to StarClan that it would open again. That she'd tell him everything was fine.

He was hardly aware as Dewstorm padded to his side and rested a paw on her flank. After a moment, he shook his head. "I'm sorry," He murmured.

His words sent thorns through his heart. It confirmed the horrible truth that he hadn't wanted to accept. *No... Oh, Poppywing, no!* He parted his jaws and let a long wail escape him, screaming out all the pain and despair that gripped his heart until it shattered under the weight of it all.

He buried his face into her red fur, beginning to sob and tremble uncontrollably in his grief. *She can't be gone...! She can't...!* He thought desperately as he tried to drink in the warm scent of his sweet, beloved Poppywing. But the sharp reek of blood poisoned it.

"I'll tell the clan." He heard Hawkfeather murmur behind him.

At the medicine cat's voice, Rainheart's agony melted into fury. *I trusted you...* His legs shook under him as he stood and turned to face Hawkfeather, hatred blazing through his trembling, grief

stricken body. "You call yourself a medicine cat?" He snarled. "You're supposed to save cats!"

Hawkfeather hesitated and met his gaze solemnly. "Medicine cats cannot always save their clanmates," He meowed quietly. "Sometimes we have no choice but to accept the fate StarClan has laid down."

His words only fueled Rainheart's anger, igniting a flame in his heart. "Fate?" He echoed angrily, unable to contain his fury. *How dare he say it was Poppywing's fate to die like this! How dare he!* "Fate? This was not fate! She wasn't supposed to die!"

He forced his heavy paws forward, moving toward him. Hawkfeather backed up warily as he hissed at the medicine cat. "She was supposed to have my kits! We were supposed to name them together, and raise them together!"

"Rainheart, come here," Dewstorm urged quietly from behind him. "I'll get you some thyme."

He's a fool if he thinks some herb is going to fix this! Rainheart thought, his tail bushed up and lashing madly. *Poppywing is dead! Nothing can heal my heart!* He glared at Hawkfeather, anger pulsing through his trembling muscles. "You killed her!" He snarled. *You could have saved her, but you let her bleed to death!*

Hawkfeather's yellow eyes filled with unease, seeing how out of control he was. He backed up against the wall of the den, eyeing him warily. "We did everything we could, Rainheart," He said quietly.

If you had, she would still be alive! Rainheart felt rage seize his body, and he bared his teeth, crouching and unsheathing his claws, digging them into the earth. His muscles burned to take out his agony on something. And Hawkfeather was just the thing.

The medicine cat tensed, preparing for his attack. Rainheart growled as he glared at him, breathing heavily. But suddenly, his fury faded and turned to a heart wrenching agony once more. He knew that Hawkfeather wasn't to blame. He felt his bunched

muscles tremble, and he shut his eyes before spinning and bolting out of the nursery. I can't stay here any longer!

The second he burst into the clearing, Bloomfire leaped to her paws in alarm. "Rainheart! What-"

He shot past her, the world bright and fuzzy around him as he pushed his way through the camp, thrusting his clanmates aside. *Get out of my way! I need to get out of here!*

"Rainheart!"

"What happened?"

"Hey!"

He charged onward through the thorn tunnel, hardly aware of his surroundings now. The trees around him blurred as he ran, and he could hear nothing but his heartbeat roaring in his ears. His paws thudded madly as he tore up mud and pine needles behind him. *Where am I going? What am I doing?* He slowly became aware of himself and staggered to a halt, nearly collapsing.

He was in the middle of the pine forest, sunlight tinting the trees in gold. Rainheart breathed heavily, his flanks heaving as he trembled, staring down at his paws. He saw blood on his toes and guessed that he must have torn a few claws while running. His head ached terribly, and his entire body felt numb.

Poppywing... He shut his eyes and let out a cry of grief, sitting down and slumping forward. He had been injured in battles before. But he had never felt any kind of agony like he felt now. It felt as though some cat had slashed his heart in two. This was a wound that could not be healed.

"Oh, Poppywing..." He cried as he trembled uncontrollably. "I'm so sorry... It shouldn't have been this way. We were supposed to be together!" He sobbed harder as he remembered how excited he was to have kits, to raise them with Poppywing. All of those dreams had been shattered. "I just want you back... Please!" He pleaded. "I need you, Poppywing...!"

Though he received no response, he knew the truth. No cat comes back from StarClan. She can't come back to me. A thought flickered in his mind, slightly easing the pain in his heart. *But I can go to her.* He had a choice to make. Live in a world without the cat he loved more than anything. Or spend eternity with her.

"Yes..." Rainheart breathed and slowly rose to his paws, trembling. "I know what to do..." Without another thought, he ran in the direction of the ThunderClan border.

He charged through the trees, his mind numb and fuzzy. He knew exactly where to go. He pushed his way through some bushes and tensed. There lay the den of the fox he'd found while on Cougarfoot's patrol just yesterday. The scent of fox was fresh and sickening.

Instinct screamed at him to turn back. Any sane cat wouldn't be anywhere near here on his own. For a heartbeat, he hesitated. *Can I really go through with this?* He thought numbly. *Can I let myself die?* As he thought about Poppywing, his heart burned with agony again, and he swallowed back a cry. *Yes. I would do anything for you, Poppywing. Including this.*

He slowly stepped out from the bushes and toward the den. He half expected the fox to leap out and attack him, but it never did. *It must be asleep inside.* He realized. He trembled as he crept closer to the mouth of the den. He stared into the darkness for a moment, then sat down, lowering his head and shutting his eyes.

He remembered how Silverblossom had grieved deeply for Stormstar when he'd died. Now in death, they were together in StarClan. *That will be me and Poppywing.* He thought. *Very soon.*

"Rainheart? What are you doing here?"

Bloomfire? He was startled at his sister's raspy meow from behind him. Part of him wanted to turn to her and cry into her fur, let her comfort him as she had earlier. But the truth was, she couldn't comfort him. No cat could. No cat but Poppywing.

That wasn't all. He knew that he could never go through with this if

he saw Bloomfire's face. It would change his mind. And he had no will to do anything but be with Poppywing once more. "I can't do it," He rasped, his head low as he refused to look at her. "I can't live without Poppywing."

"But I have great news! One of your kits is alive! He was hidden in the blood and moss." Bloomfire tried to sound happy, but her voice shook. She was afraid for him, and it made his heart ache even more.

A kit? Surprise flashed through Rainheart. *One of my kits is alive... One of Poppywing's kits...* He felt agony pierce his heart as he thought of his mate, and he shut his eyes. *How can I ever live in a world without Poppywing? Even if I have a kit, he will never be Poppywing. My heart is too broken to love anything more.*

"I don't care," He growled, feeling his heart twist with misery as he spoke words he thought he'd never say. "That kit means nothing to me now." He opened his eyes and looked down into the shadows of the fox den, the stench of the creature filling his lungs. "All that I want is Poppywing."

For a moment, it was silent. Then Bloomfire spoke, her voice shaking. "Rainheart, let's go back to camp."

The sound of his sister's voice was killing him. Rainheart knew that if he was going to do this, it had to be now. Poppywing is waiting. "Name the kit Bloodkit," He rasped, hardly understanding his words as he spoke his heart. "That's all he is. A scrap of Poppywing's blood." *The blood that got her killed...*

He shakily rose to his paws, drawing in a deep breath as he stared down into the fox den. This is it... He swallowed back a sob. "I'm coming, Poppywing," He said quietly, his voice cracking. "We can be together in StarClan." The thought of being with her again gave him courage, and he leaped forward.

"Rainheart!" He heard Bloomfire yowl behind him, but he ignored it and ran further down the tunnel, the heavy reek of fox and dirt overwhelming him. He felt his hind paw trip over something hard, and he let out a gasp as he fell, his chin thudding onto the earth.

He staggered to his paws and turned, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He expected to see a tree root. But as his vision cleared, he let out a gasp, feeling his blood turn to ice. Before him lie the mangled skeleton of a cat.

Stormstar... He swayed on his paws, growing nauseous and dizzy with fear. A loud snarl rose from behind him, and he spun just as the fox lunged at him and fastened it's teeth around his body.

Rainheart let out a screech of agony and twisted instinctively to free himself, but it only caused the fox's fangs to tear at his flesh. The furious animal continued to toss him around, ripping at his body mercilessly until all that he could be aware of was excruciating pain and the stench of his own blood under the snarling on the fox, until finally, the world faded around him and went dark.

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When Rainheart opened his eyes again, he felt warm grass under him. He drank in a breath and trembled as he opened his eyes, half expecting to see the fox. But he was in a beautiful pine forest, lush and green. He slowly stood, relieved when he felt that his pain had vanished. The grass under his paws glittered with stars. *I did it... I'm in StarClan!*

He looked up and felt delight blaze through his body. A familiar red tabby she-cat was padding in the grass ahead of him, her back to him.

"Poppywing!" He let out a cry of joy and bounded through the soft grass toward her.

At his voice, she seemed to freeze and spun to face him, her eyes wide with shock. "Rainheart?" She gasped.

As he reached her, he pressed his head into her soft, warm fur, his heart swelling with happiness and love. "Oh, Poppywing!" He cried. "I'm so happy to see you!"

"I-" She seemed stunned and stepped back, staring at him in bewilderment. "Rainheart, what are you doing here? Did you..." She

noticed the stars in his fur and gasped. "You're dead... Oh Rainheart, what happened to you?"

He stepped forward and gave her a nuzzle. "I needed you, Poppywing," He murmured. "I couldn't live without you. I love you more than anything." He gazed at her happily, ready to burst with affection.

For a moment, she didn't respond, her wide blue eyes fixed on him. "Wait... You..." She let out a gasp. "Rainheart, you didn't..."

"I had to!" He meowed warmly. "We're together again, and this time nothing can change that."

Poppywing stared at him. "A kit survived..." She whispered.

"I know," Rainheart meowed.

"You *know?"* Poppywing exclaimed, her eyes lighting with disbelief. "You knew this, and you still-" She broke off and shut her eyes. "You abandoned our son..."

Rainheart's happiness faded as he heard the pain in her voice. He moved closer to her. "Poppywing, he wouldn't have had a mother."

"And now he doesn't have a father either!" She snapped suddenly, and he stepped back in surprise. "You left our kit to be an orphan!"

"Poppywing, no, I..." Rainheart stared at her pleadingly. "You're more important to me. I would do anything for you."

She stared back at him, heartache flaring in her blue eyes. "Then you should have stayed with our son," She rasped.

"Poppywing..." He took a step toward her. "I love you."

She stared back into his eyes for a long moment, then turned away.

"Poppywing?" He started after her, but she broke into a run and disappeared into the forest. "Poppywing..." He slowly stopped, staring after her numbly. His heart throbbed with sadness and loss.

I did the right thing... I'm with Poppywing now... He sat down and stared at his paws. *But will she ever forgive me for this?* He looked down into a strange clear pool and saw his son curled up in the ShadowClan nursery, his dark red striped flank rising and falling as he slept.

He felt a flash of admiration for him, then guilt. *I'm sorry. But I had to choose Poppywing over you. Bloomfire will take care of you. I trust her with you more than anyone. You will be a great warrior... Bloodkit.*

THE END